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Planned test of antisatellite device stirs arms control debate

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Arms control advocates are dismayed by the Reagan administration's plan to conduct the first American test of an antisatellite weapon against a target in space.

The White House has notified Congress that the test is needed because the Soviet Union is "well ahead" of the United States in this field and the US must "restore the military balance."

But many arms control experts challenge the administration's position. The Soviets' operational system is an extremely crude one, they argue, and going ahead with testing of an American antisatellite system will simply spur an arms race in space.

"The Soviets have no effective antisatellite capability," says Paul Warnke, who negotiated the unratified SALT II treaty. "Their system is a low-orbiting one with no rapid-firing capability and it does not work well. We have more capability with our space shuttle than they have with their system."

"This demonstrates that arms control policy in the the Reagan administration is dominated by those who are opposed to arms control," Mr. Warnke adds.

Administration critics in Congress also worry about the implications of the test for the upcoming summit meeting between the President and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Sen. Dale Bumpers (D) of Arkansas, for instance, believes it would be better to delay such testing until after the summit, and let the summit tackle this problem, according to an aide.

But administration officials say the test should have no impact on the summit meeting and will provide an "incentive" for Moscow to negotiate limits on such weapons — a view shared by antisatellite backers in Congress.

Antisatellite weapons, known as ASATs, are aimed at destroying military satellites. The Soviets have had a system since 1968, but one judged by scientists as relatively unsophisticated and of very limited threat to the US. It involves launching a heavy satellite into orbit with its intended target until it draws close and explodes like a grenade. Many Soviet tests of the system have been reported to be failures.

The Soviet ASAT can reach only American reconnaissance satellites in low orbits of a few hundred miles from Earth and not the most important early-warning and communications systems that are in orbits 12,000 miles and higher.

The American ASAT, which first underwent a flight test in January 1984, is much more sophisticated. Called the miniature homing vehicle, it is a 33-pound device fitted onto the front of a small rocket, which is slung beneath an F-15 fighter.

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After it is launched, sensors on the device enable it to home in on a satellite and collide with it. A second test of the ASAT last November against a point in space was only partially successful, according to the General Accounting Office.

Arms control experts believe that, once the US successfully tests the device against a space target, the Soviets will have no option but to develop new ASAT systems of their own.

Even some in the US military are known to be less than enthusiastic about the Air Force test program because the US is far more dependent on satellites for communications and surveillance than is the Soviet Union.

Trying to negotiate a treaty banning ASATs has been problematic. The US and Soviet Union held two rounds of talks in 1978, but these broke down after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Two years ago the Russians proposed a moratorium on antisatellite weapons, but the administration rejected the idea. The issue now is on the agenda in the Geneva arms talks.

During the congressional debate on the subject in June, administration critics warned that, once the American ASAT was successfully tested against a space target, it would be hard to negotiate a mutual ban on deployment.